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Diagnosing why some students do not succeed

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Given the widespread concern that too many students are dropping out of college before they get their degrees, why do so many colleges ignore the existing body of literature about what works to improve student retention? Why, in fact, do they pay a premium to external entities for information that is available to anyone?

At a time when unprecedented numbers of people need some form of postsecondary training, colleges are increasingly outsourcing key operations that help students stay in college and succeed. Some enrollment-management firms, historically focused on admissions issues, have expanded their missions to include student retention, while a spate of new groups and consultants with similar aims has recently appeared. Those organizations help design and carry out recruitment, retention, and financial-aid strategies; provide coaching for individual students; conduct campus-climate assessments; and recommend approaches to identify and work with students at risk of dropping out.

In the past few years, several consulting firms have asked me about ideas, people, and institutions that represent cutting-edge work in promoting student success. I've even been invited on a few occasions to speak at what is the organization's first or second national conference on student success. In the spirit of full disclosure: I do the former gratis; for the latter I get a fee.

There is nothing remarkable about that exchange; in an open market, the seller provides a service at a price the buyer is willing to pay. But it is mildly troubling that some of the firms are repackaging published material about teaching, learning, and supporting students and selling it back in some instances to the very institutions that produced the research. Their print and online marketing materials legitimize their expertise by citing the work of scholars.

Last year one firm with a long, productive record of improving organizational performance in another field added a higher-education division and now offers, for a hefty fee, consultations in the areas of enrollment management and retention. To become familiar with the higher-education literature and language, its staff members spent a fair amount of time debriefing people like me about the language they should use to describe products and services that would appeal to colleges. How can it be possible for that firm and others like it to master and convert a complicated body of knowledge about students and colleges into customized, actionable interventions specific to their client institutions in such a short period of time?

To the extent that enrollment-management firms and freelance consultants actually do help more students succeed, we should welcome and celebrate their contributions. A growing body of evidence indicates that, when done well, certain practices positively influence student engagement, persistence, and satisfaction. Those experiences — which I summarize in the monograph "High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter," published this year by the American Association of Colleges and Universities — include learning communities, writing-intensive courses, study abroad, student-faculty research, and culminating experiences like capstone courses, comprehensive exams, and theses. Equally important, participating in some of those activities seems to have compensatory effects, in that they also improve the performance of students of color and first-generation students.

But that research, along with other instructive findings disseminated over the past decade, is accessible to anyone looking for it. For example, the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative, a unit of the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics, sponsored a student-success symposium in November 2006 for which several major syntheses of the literature, including best practices, were prepared (http://nces.ed.gov/IPEDS/research/papers.asp). That outstanding body of up-to-date work has hardly been mentioned since, and none of the consultants who have talked with me have been aware of that treasure-trove of information.

Meanwhile, only a paltry number of institutions share internally the information they do have about the student experience. Many people on a campus first learn about their own students' and institution's performance in the local newspaper. One more sad fact is that few colleges hold large-scale events to bring together the faculty members, administrators, and others who need the information about effective educational practices to improve teaching and student learning. Rarer still are attempts to carry out and assess the impact of substantive, data-driven programs on student learning.

Why don't more colleges effectively use published research or their own outcomes-assessment results to improve teaching and learning? Scholars, institutional leaders, members of governing boards, and policy makers share some of the responsibility for the shortfalls.

Scholars often use indecipherable prose, mistakenly presuming that the best research is that which informs other scholars and adds to the knowledge base rather than writing for the people who need the information to guide their efforts. For their parts, presidents and provosts understandably attend to the crisis du jour. Further, many institutional leaders are short-timers; just as priorities, strategic plans, and tactics are established and initial steps are taken, key administrators move on. The pattern is so predictable that wizened faculty and staff members have learned to sit on the sidelines, waiting for the announcement about the next set of strategic priorities.

Policy makers and state-university-system officials frequently speak authoritatively about promoting student success, but too often they do not hold institutions accountable for taking actions that will make a difference. Incentive structures need to change if more students — especially those from historically underserved backgrounds — are to survive and thrive in college. For example, most four-year institutions have transfer-articulation agreements with two-year colleges, but many students report not knowing for sure, when they transfer, how many of their credits will actually count toward a degree or the major. At some institutions, a significant

number of students subsequently discover that they must repeat some courses similar to those they've already taken.

Three things could help colleges enhance student learning and increase the number who persist in their studies and graduate. First and foremost, institutions must become familiar with and determine how to productively *use* the available information about effective educational practices. Despite the efforts of accreditors and others, higher education still devotes only a minuscule fraction of its resources, compared with other mature industries, to performance benchmarking and using that information to get better. One positive step would be to redirect what are often expensive symbolic gestures toward demonstrating that the institution "cares" — paying for advice about what the literature says about what matters to student success — and use those resources to scale up demonstrably effective programs and activities, especially those focused on at-risk populations.

To encourage movement in that direction, such reporting templates as the Voluntary System of Accountability, designed for public universities, and the U-CAN college Web site, for private colleges, could feature a high-impact-practices index: the ratio of the number of students who annually participate in activities with a positive influence on student success to the total number of undergraduates at an institution.

Second, governing boards should learn what their institutions must do to promote student success and look for leaders who have concrete ideas for mobilizing faculty and staff members. While trustees should not meddle in everyday campus affairs, they should evaluate administrators in part on the basis of whether empirically derived, effective educational practices and continuous quality-improvement processes are put in place throughout their institutions. They should also require annual reports that feature those indicators.

Third, some credible entity like the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers or the Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice, at the University of Southern California, should offer a seal of approval — for which for-profit vendors and consultants would apply — designating that certain services and products are of acceptable quality when it comes to enhancing student retention and success. The organization issuing the seal of approval should also develop a statement of best practices in enrollment management and develop a template by which colleges and other organizations and interested individuals could estimate the degree to which an institution adheres to those practices.

That could well result in additional sets of college rankings. At the same time, those exercises would focus attention on institutional actions that contribute to the desired outcomes of higher education. That approach, after all is said and done, is squarely in the public interest and the espoused goal of enrollment managers, their institutions, and the burgeoning student-success industry.

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